



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SOME ENGLISH WOMEN NOVELISTS

BY ALICE A. SMITH

HAZLITT, writing of Fanny Burney, said: "She is a quick, lively and accurate observer of persons and things; but she always looks at them with the consciousness of her sex, and in that point of view in which it is the particular business and interest of women to observe them." The modern reader who delights in the artless feminities of *Evelina* will not agree with Hazlitt in regarding this as a limitation, for it is the artist's aim to give expression to her personal experience of life. When Jane Austen was urged to write "an historical romance," she refused to forsake first-hand observation for second-hand learning. "No," she said, "I must keep to my own style and go on in my own way. . . . I am convinced I should totally fail in any other."

As the sphere of women's activities has expanded, so the range of the woman novelist has widened. Mrs. Aphra Behn gave ballast to the extravagance of the heroic romance by introducing real incidents from her early life in the Colonies. Learned contemporaries sat up all night, absorbed in Miss Burney's "plain tale of the everyday life of a delicate girl," burdened, it is true, with a somewhat fantastic bunch of relatives. In Jane Austen's work the analytic novel reached a perfection of workmanship that suggests miniature painting on ivory. In Charlotte Brontë's day the professional life of middle-class women was still limited to that of the governess. George Eliot's women look further afield, and reflect her interest in those economic and class questions that exercised the liberal minds of her day.

In the conduct of life, argues Socrates in the *Phædo*, folk may choose between two ways. They may seek the truth for themselves, or they may accept the best of human laws, "and embarking on these as on a raft, risk the voyage of life." One is prepared to find that the bulk of women writers accept the social order, and cast round it a romantic halo calculated to induce a

like complaisance in the reader. The good girl is rewarded with a Fairy Prince. The good boy wins land and wealth. The tale ends with the wedding feast, and we are left to conclude that they live happily ever after.

In reaction from this romantic optimism, the young realists who claimed the suffrages of intelligent readers in the decade before the European War, based their claim to view life with a candid eye on the principle laid down by Mr. W. L. George in *A Novelist on Novels*. Life, according to this view, is most vivid when it is most unpleasant. It is the novelist's aim to make life vivid, therefore the novel acquires merit in proportion to the unpleasantness of its subject. But life is a mixed affair, and neither realist nor romantic sees it whole. In *Legend*, Miss Clemence Dane's study in æsthetic egoism, Jasper Flood makes the suggestive guess that the romantic escapes into the world of dreams from the world in which he has to live; whereas the realist "lives in a fair world of his own, from which he peers at ours, and writes of it as we do not dare to write." What are vaguely termed "the novels that count," are distinguished from the mass of print that loads the library tables by virtue of the writer's individual vision of life. Purely technical achievement is more widely distributed. The author of a recent novel entitled *My Three Husbands* goes so far as to assert that no one bothers about style nowadays, for anyone can write. The "purple patch," beloved of the Victorians, is laid away in lavender in college text-books. Modern novelists are content to have less style than their predecessors if we will credit them with more ideas.

When we come to scrutinize these ideas we find in the younger women novelists a definite trend of thought about life, but they harbor no conclusions. Their male contemporaries have tended to belittle the importance of social sanctions by laying stress on the inadequacy, in particular cases, of general laws rigidly enforced. The subversive tendency that responsible elders are apt to bewail is a danger signal flown from the bitterness of thwarted youth. But bitterness is not a characteristic of women writers. They are not concerned to knock down the things they deem evil, though they may kill them with the slow acid of satire. The satire that pervades as a subtle essence the work of Jane Austen,

and in a less degree of Fanny Burney, is free from the *sæva indignatio* of Swift. Nor do they thump the cushions of sex controversy. With the exception of Miss Dorothy Richardson, they do not share the view of Manthis, in Mr. Norman Douglas's diverting allegory *They Went*, who held that the male is a blind opinionated brute, whose sole claim to ascendancy rests on his power to hit with his fists. On the contrary they are interested in men as lovers or potential lovers, and not at all in men as builders of Empire, or successful travellers in preserves and pickles. The first three great women novelists drew three types of men. We may call them types without implying that the individual portraits are lacking in personality, for "persons must be partly types, or they become monsters." Lord Orville, *Evelina's* hero, is the perfect gentleman, *sans peur et sans reproche*, who is generally regarded as "the woman's man," though he first sprang from the refined mind of Samuel Richardson. To Jane Austen men were of little account, whether by reason of temperament, or because her quiet life left her unawakened, we do not know. In England the word curate connotes either an assistant clergyman, or a piece of furniture designed to hold plates of cakes with a view to facilitating the circulation of these desirable edibles at afternoon tea. Jane Austen's young men are of the genus *curate*. Charlotte Brontë, the creature of balked passion, loved to portray "man the master."

These are not aspects of manhood on which the man writer tends to dwell. We are used to finding the critics making merry over "women's men," although we feel that there is something not quite nice about a mind that can decry Shakespeare's women as "men's women," which is the heretical view of Miriam Henderson, Miss Dorothy Richardson's heroine. It is an amusing and suggestive exercise to trace these three types in the writings of our contemporaries, to meet the perfect gentleman or the curate in Miss Meynell's sensitively adjusted families, or to espy man the master intruding in the cultured coteries of Miss Clemence Dane or Miss Amber Reeves. For the women writers prefer a limited efficiency to all-conquering genius, possibly because outstanding success depends, in some degree, on lack of ruth. Only in the naïvely unmoral pages of *Martin Schuler*, by Miss Romer Wilson,

does genius succeed with the completeness that is possible only to the complete egoist. But even here success is qualified, for Martin dies in the moment of triumph from heart-failure, brought on by ecstasy at the perfection of his own opera, or by chagrin at the orchestra's inadequate rendering of it. In the mental haze induced by Miss Wilson's brilliant inconsequence, one is in doubt whether to view Martin's demise as the gesture of Mephistopheles claiming his own, or as the apotheosis of one who had tasted all that the gods had to offer, but in either case the fatality is final. In Miss Clemence Dane's *Legend*, a country doctor, with nothing to say, wins Madala Grey from Kent Rehan, an artist of genius. Alwynne, in *The Regiment of Women*, by the same writer, "throws herself away" on Roger, whom Clare contemptuously dubs "the gardener." Miss Amber Reeves' prescient heroine in *Helen in Love* chooses no less dull a fellow in preference to a galaxy of intellectuals. Miss Dorothy Richardson alone will be placated neither by dullness nor by extinction. Male critics are wont to note with pained surprise that she cannot use the word *man* without getting cross. They assert plaintively that she really does not understand them. But Pastor Lahmann in *Pointed Roofs*, and Mr. Hancock, the dentist for whom Miriam Henderson works in *The Tunnel*, are men whose friendship, up to a certain point, gave her interest and mental radiance. Men darken her mind only when they, or meddlesome onlookers, drag in the clouding irrelevance, as she regards it, of sex, or when they are "sitting in studies doing something cleverly, being very important, men of letters, and looking for approbation." In *Interim* Miriam decrees "no more interest in men. . . . They shut off the inside world." In *Pointed Roofs*, published in 1915, Miriam leaves her home, where economical make-shifts were coming to outweigh the delights of membership of a tennis club, and seeks "life" as a governess in Germany. Her sojourn there is brief, for complications threaten, and Miriam runs from complications on principle. We receive a vivid impression of the life of the school, for Miriam displays abnormal sensitiveness to physical detail. In retrospect, as we learn in *The Tunnel*, the time in Germany was a golden happy light, and she learnt there to distinguish good music from bad, but it was a drab tale at the first telling. Subsequent volumes describe

Miriam's experiences as a governess in England, and in a boarding house in London. Besides being a characteristic example of Miss Richardson's method, *The Tunnel* is an interesting document of the suburban girl's outlook in the days when she had begun to demand independence and a salary, but was not yet prepared to accept the expense and drudgery of professional training. Miriam at her desk in the dentist's office presents a dreadful picture of fussy inefficiency. "I must stop thinking," she remarks naïvely, "and become fearfully efficient."

The method which Miss Richardson originated, possibly without appreciating its æsthetic significance, has been adopted by Miss May Sinclair in her *Mary Olivier*, and defended by her in an appreciation of *The Tunnel*, with the vivacity and generosity of a sincere craftsman. Miss Sinclair maintains that Miss Richardson has simply imposed on herself the conditions that life imposes on us all. "In this series," she says, "there is no drama, no situation, no set scene. Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson's stream of consciousness going on and on." In harmony with this method, the style goes on and on. Commas, like incidents, may or may not happen. In either case selection is taboo. Mr. J. D. Beresford in a Preface to *Pointed Roofs* says that Miss Richardson goes head under, and becomes a very part of the human element she has described. The reader, whose mind staggers on the brink of delirium, after a frenzied pursuit of ten minutes' worth of Miriam's consciousness, would fain retort that it is the author's job, and not the reader's, to make Miriam's experience coherent.

In *The Pelicans*, by Miss E. M. Delafield, Hazel is deemed an arrant pagan, when she asserts that every girl owes it to herself to do what seems right to her with her own life. A candid egoism is the outstanding quality of Miss Delafield's heroines, and well-meant meddlesomeness is a favorite *leit-motif* with her. For some of her material she goes to the same world as Miss Richardson. She, too, describes middle-class girls, earning their living as milliners or secretaries, and living drearily in boarding-houses or clubs for working women. But she writes of this life as a spectator. She composes a plot and tells a tale. Her portrayals are almost photographic in their clearness of outline, and provide

us with a varied record of English life in town and country-town. She chooses as the victims of her laughter-loving satire efficient busybodies like Cousin Bertie in *The Pelicans*, who thinks that to understand children is a God-given knack, that one is simply lucky enough to possess. "'One' does not sound particularly egotistical, and conveys 'I' quite successfully to a practised listener." In *Tension*, the state of nerves that overtakes all and sundry has its source in Edna Rossiter's passion for propaganda, which is, Miss Delafield believes, a vital characteristic of those who know least of human nature.

In Miss Clemence Dane's novels we are shown two pictures of women whose egoism, craving for power, impels them to meddle with their friends' destinies. In *Legend*, the life-story of Madala Grey comes to us piece-meal in the clever talk of some literary æsthetes, who have just learned that she is dead. To them she was a symbol, a legend. They mourned the departed genius; for the warm-hearted girl and the happy wife they cared not at all. To Anita Serle, Madala's closest friend, her death gives the chance of a lifetime. For Anita has studied her, and intends to achieve greatness by writing her biography. "I tell you," she says, "I've got her naked, pinned down, and now I shall make her again. Drained her? Yes, I meant to." In *Legend*, as in Mrs. Constance Holme's prize novel, *The Splendid Fairing*, the nervous strain of a lifetime is concentrated, with explosive effect, in the action of a few hours; but in Miss Dane's *Regiment of Women*, emotions gather and fester as the school year drags on. In the stifling atmosphere of fussy importance and enthusiasm, Clare Harthill's dominant personality fed its lust for power. She rejoiced when in Louise's young heart "she toppled God off his throne, and the vacant seat was hers, to fill or flout as she chose." Anita and Clare are vampire-women. They act with the deliberation of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. But the interference of well-meaning women with other people's lives is hardly less dangerous. "We women are born meddlers," says Elsbeth to Roger in *The Regiment of Women*, "we think it's our mission to put things to rights."

In Miss Stella Benson's *Living Alone*, after the witch had had a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, and flown back to England, Sarah Brown stepped over the threshold of the greatest home of

all, into the House of Living Alone. In the poem with which she prefaces this "little alien book, written for the magically inclined minority," Miss Benson shows the soul, stricken by the years of war, seeking peace, and finding it neither in memory nor in hope:

I will divorce myself. . . .
I have sold myself for silence, for the jewel
Of silence, and the shadow of a vision.

If we accept life as the world offers it to us, we shall find only second-bests. "Seek not the best," chants Miss Benson in *This is the End*:

Seek not the best, the best is better hidden,
Build up no plan, nor any star pursue.

When Kew was killed, and there seemed nothing left in life, Jay agreed to marry Mr. Morgan, and Anonyma said that it was well that little Jay had found Romance at last. But Mr. Russell laughed a little—"Yes," he said, "this is the end." Humbug is the oil that lubricates this world's wheels. "No humbug!" shares the honors with "Hands off!" as the slogan of the woman novelist. Miss Marchrose, who had thought, "like fools of girls always do," that love meant happiness, saved her life from barrenness by accepting, like Jay, the second-best. But she keeps herself right with her Creator by doing it with her eyes open. "You have your scale of values clear," Edna's husband said to her, "and once that's done you can afford to accept the truth."

This somewhat barren doctrine is suggested again in *Columbine* by Miss Viola Meynell. Here the suggestion that love is not all is the more unexpected, in that her novels have no theme but "passion," as Miss Meynell roundly terms it. Nor does she shrink from pluralizing her emotions. In *Columbine*, Dixon Parish loved Jennifer and Lily at the same time, while, in *Modern Lovers*, Effie was simultaneously absorbed in Clive and Oliver. Miss Meynell's heroines spend their lives expecting to fall in love, falling in love, and, with surprising frequency, falling out of love. They are concerned as little as *Evelina* with the march of events or the claims of citizenship. Social questions, thought Martha in *Martha Vine*, are matters of purely professional interest and advancement for a curate. This attitude is as characteristic of

Miss Meynell's Londoners as of the country-bred girls of her earlier books: Dorcas in *Cross-in-Hand Farm*, *Lot Barrow* and *Martha Vine*. The world's erratic course does not deflect the orbit of these delicately ordered lives. The action is inward only, yet it is catastrophic. Passion falls like a thunder-bolt out of a clear sky. The young people are too honest, too simple, too certain that their feelings are all that matter in the world at the moment, to conceal its course. They are hysterical, remote from modern life, but they are drawn with the crystalline sincerity, and the incommunicable and astounding naïvete, that blend in the delicate sampler-work of Miss Meynell's art.

Miss Sheila Kaye-Smith alone locates, consistently and definitely, the source of happiness that is hid from her contemporaries in a secret place, to be seen perhaps only in some sunset hour, when the light dying in the west reveals for a moment the isle of dreams. For Miss Kaye-Smith Mother Earth is the Great Healer. At times the sense of earth in her work is as strong as Knut Hamsun's in that epic of earth, *Growth of the Soil*. Sussex is the locality from which she draws her inspiration. In a lecture that she gave recently, on the place of local color in fiction, Miss Kaye-Smith noted that Sussex came next in popularity to Cornwall among novelists seeking for the spirit of place. Now the quality of the Sussex landscape is harmonious and responsive. In the perfect proportions of the Down country there is variety, but details are not obtrusive. Miss Kaye-Smith's studies in personality blend with this background, and draw from it something of its ample and fundamentally stable character. The pursuit of a man's ambition is the theme of *Sussex Gorse* and *Tamarisk Town*. In the latter, Monypenny pursues his plan of making Marlingate a successful watering-place with a concentration of purpose that is too intense for perfect sanity. He succeeds, and, realizing too late that success had cost him his love and his sense of beauty, conceives the monstrous idea of destroying his own creation. In *Sussex Gorse*, Reuben Backfield determined, as a lad of sixteen, to devote his life to subduing the moor on Boarzell. The wild places should be tamed as young bulls are tamed. He pays no heed to his father's warning: "What's the use of hundreds of acres if you ar'n't comfortable at home? I've no ambi-

tions, so I'm a happy man." Reuben exhausts his wife, maims his brother, and drives his children to rebellion, but he succeeds. In *Little England*, a story of war-time that is in some respects Miss Kaye-Smith's most vital achievement, the earth did not fail Mr. Sumption, blacksmith and preacher, when his boy Jerry was shot for staying behind the lines with a girl, and his congregation turned against him, all except Thyrza Beatup.

American reviewers have said that the modern English novel leads them to believe that the standards which civilization has been centuries in erecting are falling into chaos, or even that "all moral standards are being let down." But the young women novelists who refuse to embark on the raft of custom, and seek the truth for themselves, are not concerned to uphold things as they are, nor even to represent things as they ought to be. They hold the mirror up to their little corner of life, and they probe and wonder and question, as though they would echo Robert Louis Stevenson's appeal to the spae-wife:

O, I wad like to ken—to the beggar-wife says I—
The reason o' the cause an' the wherefore o' the why,

and the English life that they reflect, the life of town or country, of country-town or suburb, is the life of an England in transition. Close behind them lies the "progressive" nineteenth century, when the rich had their definite responsibilities and the poor their definite duties; when the daily round, the common task, furnished all that girls needed to ask. Quite clever children were still expected to obey their parents when Miss Amber Reeves was at school. When Miss Richardson was a girl, to live in rooms in London was dreadfully emancipated, and it was a daring act to cycle in a skirt without a petticoat, as we learn from an almost lyric passage in *The Tunnel*. Miss Stella Benson's young women have crossed the threshold into this less manageable age. Jay in *This is the End* was a 'bus conductor,—'bus conductors do not wear skirts,—and to disobey was an instinct with her. The witch in *Living Alone*, with her "How d'you mean?" was one of those provoking young women who eternally question things that well-brought-up people simply know are just so. The devoted parents of Miss Meynell's love-absorbed boys and girls stand aside in suf-

fering silence. They are too modern to interfere, too old-fashioned to trust their children's freedom. In *The Pelicans*, Miss Delafield afflicts Cousin Bertie, whose notions of right and wrong are clear-cut and definite, with a daughter who maintains that every case has its own laws. Human life seems less like a progress than the last generation imagined, and more like the swing of a pendulum. With the increasing power of women to determine their own lives, our younger novelists are feeling after a new confession of faith in which one may discern genuine mystical quality. They sense a self-fulfilment, a happiness, dependent neither on success, as men esteem success in life and love, nor on mere self-sacrifice, as men esteem self-sacrifice—in women. But they present us with no Utopia labelled “for immediate entry,” they hawk no universal panacea for human ills. The secret of their art is not assurance, nor achievement, but “the passion for the search.”

ALICE A. SMITH.